

## TWO FACES OF BENGALI ETHNICITY: MUSLIM BENGALI OR BENGALI MUSLIM\*

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### I

THE BIRTH OF Bangladesh in 1971 is an event of historic importance if there ever was one. Its importance is not merely political, to be measured in terms of a new balance of powers in South Asia. More than such a consideration, which may seem transient from a long-term perspective, it is its importance to our understanding of the widespread phenomenon of cultural pluralism, or ethnic difference, and the consequent problem of national integration in old states and new, which needs to be stressed.<sup>1</sup> Laboratory situations are practically non-existent in the experience of social science research, so that when one does arise—we cannot set them up—the opportunity must be seized and its implications examined to improve our historical and theoretical understanding of the social processes concerned. In what follows, an attempt is made to briefly bring out some of the implications of the birth of Bangladesh as an independent nation for research into the phenomenon of cultural difference within a state. A more detailed study will require both a rethinking of conceptual categories current in the field as well as a re-examination of historical records and ethnographic accounts from new perspectives.

The question that seems to me to be the crucial one is how we might understand, i.e., render sociologically intelligible, the choice which Bengali Muslims made in 1971, reversing the earlier choice which they had made a generation ago when they enthusiastically supported the demand for Pakistan and helped in a big way to win it in 1947. Or, in other words, why did Bengali Muslims choose yesterday to give first place to the bond of religion, grouping themselves with Muslims in other parts of the Indian subcontinent, and have opted today for their exclusive total cultural identity? Are we to assume that the earlier choice was wrong and there-

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<sup>1</sup> It is sometimes suggested as though cultural pluralism is a problem specific to the "old societies" of the Third World which have only recently emerged as "new states." Whereas this may be broadly true, the phenomenon of ethnic difference is a prominent feature of many so-called advanced nations as well, including the United Kingdom and the United States.

fore had to be reversed, implying that what has been decided now is final and correct? Are Islam and Bengali culture being treated as "essences," important per se, or as "signs," used for other purposes?

## II

Before an answer to the above question may be attempted, it seems relevant to describe who Bengali Muslims are and how they are historically related to Muslim communities in other parts of the subcontinent.

The Muslim presence in India is generally dated back to the seventh and eighth centuries. It is said that Arabs had had trade relations with Malabar, on the western coast of India, before the advent of Islam, and when Arabia became Muslim, Arab settlements in India (and elsewhere) became so too [23, pp. 11 ff.]. A limited political foothold in Sind, further north, followed soon after. It was only in the eleventh century, however, that waves of Muslim conquests across India began and had far reaching political, social, cultural, and economic consequences [1] [6].

The conquerors differed in their aims, aptitudes, and habits. Thus, though some of them, such as the first major invader of Indian kingdoms Mahmud Ghazni, came only for loot and plunder, others stayed on. The presence of immigrants—Arabs, Mongols, Turks, Iranians, and Afghans—inevitably resulted in proselytization, voluntary as well as forcible. Spear points out that there were conversions of individuals and of groups (e.g., castes, clans) and even of large masses of people [31, pp. 30–50]. Moreover, an interesting and significant geographical pattern of distribution of Muslim communities seems to have developed. The immigrants were prominent in and near the areas of original entry but were increasingly outnumbered by converts in remoter areas. (Some exceptions to the general pattern, such as the Kashmir Valley, may be mentioned, but the relative inaccessibility of this area may well be equated with spatial remoteness.)

Among areas of mass conversion east Bengal is particularly notable.

Here, in the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a whole countryside turned to Islam. It is thought that the decaying Buddhism of the Pala dynasty of Bengal had been superimposed on their rustic animism, that the substitution of the Brahminical Sena Kings for the Palas had meant a lowering of status and caste restriction, and that the Muslim conquest of Bengal with its casteless religion offered a welcome avenue of social escape. *They also carried their customs with them, so that it could be said that the Islamization of India (so far as it went) also involved the Hinduization of Indian Islam.* [31, p. 34] (italics added)

In retaining their customs, many Muslims also retained their former low social status. "How many?" and "How low?" are historical questions which do not mean that there are straight, doubt-free answers to them. The manner in which they have been answered is, in fact, of great interest to our understanding of the problem of cultural difference in Bengal.

The state of general opinion on this issue about a hundred years ago was recorded by J. C. Lyall when he wrote that "the descendants of conquerors . . . count perhaps their hundreds," while the majority of Muslims

were already [before their conversion] in an inferior social position. Hindus, who possessing more culture and a more highly organized society, were able to withstand the influences which brought about the conversion of the rural masses. . . . The Hindu element of the population, therefore, its constitution, represents a higher social stratum, the Muhammadan element a lower one. (quoted in [25, p. 301])

Similarly, Hunter, writing about the same time as Lyall, noted: "Wherever the Muhammadans form the bulk of the population in Bengal [which was in the east] . . . they are the cultivating classes of the people, while the upper and mercantile classes are Hindus" ([12] quoted in [25, p. 301]).

There seems to have emerged at least three kinds of reaction to the above situation. The most significant of these was the effort to purify the Bengali version of the Muslim way of life, purging it of Hindu elements. This, as Hunter noted, widened the gulf between Hindus and Muslims [12]. A modern authority, Seal, writes:

In the early nineteenth century . . . [u]nder Shariatullah and his son Dadhu Miyan, a sect known as the Farazis sounded the call for a return to primitive Islam shorn of Hindu excrescences. Large numbers of the peasantry were won to the Farazi cause, and since they were mainly Muslim and their landlords and moneylenders mainly Hindu, the movement to resist the exactions of the latter took on a communal tone and brought Muslims into conflict with the government. [25, p. 310, fn. 2]

The second and third reactions represent the response of Muslim intellectuals and belong to two different periods. On the one hand, we find an effort being made to show that conversions had been peaceful and had drawn people almost equally from lower and higher castes. Rahim estimates that "the Bengali Muslim population was formed of about 30 per cent converts from the upper class non-Muslims [Buddhists and Hindus] and 35 per cent converts from the lower strata of the Hindu society" [24, p. 68]. He also cites Hindu authors and other sources to conclude that, between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, Bengali Muslims regulated their life in accordance with the tenets of Islam [24, p. 271]. More relevant than such efforts to estimate proportions and establish an earlier period of pure Islamic living, perhaps, is the fact that Bengali Hindu society itself was less severely caste ridden and evolved a simplified version of Hinduism called *sahajiya* [21, p. 266].

The third reaction, which is also more recent, on the other hand, stresses the distinctiveness of Bengali culture, of the Bengali synthesis of Hindu and Muslim ways of life supported by economic interdependence, at least in the earlier days. Thus, Khan complains:

The whole thesis about the Bengali Muslims centred round two alternatives: either they were low caste Hindus converted to Islam or they were immigrants. . . . The third and possibly the more correct assessment, *viz.*, that they were essentially neither but a distinct cultural entity, *could never occur to any one*. Bengali soil and Bengali blood are admittedly of innumerable origins but they are distinct identities in themselves. History of the growth and development also made the Bengali culture a distinct culture and the people a distinct people. . . . *So long as the traces of peculiar origin are preserved the immigrants will remain alien residents in Bengal rather than become people of Bengal.* ([13] quoted in [21, pp. 266-67], italics added)

The foregoing, written more than a decade before the birth of Bangladesh, is a most important statement to which I will return below. Suffice it to point out here that it represents the turning away of the Bengali Muslim intellectual from the ideology on which Pakistan had been founded.

### III

A few remarks about the birth of Pakistan are now in order. Wherever they lived in India, and whatever their ethnic status, Indian Muslims were equally under the protection of the Muslim state, from A.D. 711 when Sind was incorporated in the Umayyad caliphate till the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1803 a Muslim theologian Shah Abdul Aziz formally acknowledged that such protection had ceased. The rather rapid decline of the Mughal empire, the rise of non-Muslim (Hindu and Sikh) kingdoms, and finally the emergence of the British power in India caused much distress among the new leaders of Muslim communities in north and east India. These new leaders inevitably were theologians. They exhorted Muslims to purify their lives and at the same time sought to reestablish Muslim political authority. Shariatullah and Dadhu Miyan in Bengal have already been mentioned above: They not only tried to expunge the way of life of Bengali Muslims of its Hindu excrescences but also defied Hindu landlords and their protector, the East India Company, by rising in revolt. In north India Shah Waliullah led a similar but much more powerful movement. He helped in shaping the alliance between Ahmad Shah Abdali, the king of Afghanistan, and an Indian Muslim chief, Najibu-1-Daulah of the Rohillas, whom he invited to wage "holy war" against Hindus. It was his son Abdul Aziz who made the 1803 declaration mentioned above. Later Sayyid Ahmad Bareilvi, a follower of Abdul Aziz, strongly denounced borrowings from the Hindu way of life by Muslims and other kinds of deviation from the pure faith. He finally went to war against the Sikhs and temporarily occupied some territory in the northwest of the Sikh kingdom. The north and east Indian movements for the restoration of Islamic purity and Muslim power were originally independent of one another but later on became linked in the time of Bareilvi and Dadhu Miyan. The ideology underlying them was that the purity of Islam could not be guaranteed except in an independent Muslim state [1, pp. 201-17] [23, pp. 193-211] [30, pp. 39-51].

It would be historically misleading to maintain that Waliullah and Shariatullah were the founders of Muslim separatism in India. Such separatism existed from the very beginning because of essential differences between the Hindu and Muslim ways of life. The many varieties of syncretism failed or at best remained incomplete.<sup>2</sup> It would be legitimate to claim, however, that these movements not only anticipated the emergence of Pakistan with its two "wings" in the northwest and the east of the subcontinent of India but also provided its principal ideological basis.

It was economic deprivation, or the fear of it, that added a sharp edge to Muslim

<sup>2</sup> For a most illuminating discussion on this point, see [8].

separatism in the nineteenth century. This happened in Bengal, where more than half of Indian Muslims lived, earlier than in north India. Dadhu Miyan's uprising was a peasant revolt. The Permanent Settlement of Bengal had resulted in the expropriation of Muslim landlords and the impoverishment of Muslim peasantry. By the latter nineteenth century most of the land in Bengal had come under Hindu ownership. The replacement of Persian by English resulted in the Muslims being edged out of the administrative and judicial services and also the professions. A National Muhammedan Association was formed in 1878 in Calcutta with the purpose of improving the condition of Muslims through the help of the government, and not by fighting it. It was thus that the demand for separate Muslim representation came to be made in the Bengal Legislative Council. The argument was simple: Hindu and Muslim interests were not identical because their socio-economic conditions were not [25, p. 311].

Muslim leaders in north India took up a similar stand on the exclusiveness of interests but the conditions there were the opposite of those in Bengal. In the North-Western Provinces and Oudh "the [Muslims] community was a minority of some 13 per cent, but as a whole it was more influential, more prosperous and better educated than its co-religionists in any other province of British India" [25, p. 303].

From the late nineteenth century onwards, Muslim elites of north India followed a consistent political strategy, requesting privileges and making demands which would increase their political effectiveness as a minority... they were a privileged minority in the nineteenth century in the region and their leaders were determined to maintain their privileges. [5, p. 14]

A major development in Bengal was its partition in 1905, which the government defended on grounds of administrative convenience. Its critics, viz., the nationalists, complained that it was intended to divide Indians so that the British could continue to rule India. Muslims generally favoured it from 1904 onwards, and their position did improve in some respects as a result of it. Muslim separatism in Bengal was thus much strengthened by the partition of the province and its reunification reinforced rather than curbed this separatism [18, pp. 221-37]. It has been asserted by some observers that there was a direct connexion between the partition of Bengal and the founding of the Muslim League, the political organization which ultimately formulated the demand for Pakistan.<sup>3</sup>

Political and economic considerations received fresh ideological support from the philosopher poet Muhammad Iqbal. For him state and society were inseparable in the teaching of Islam, and Indian Muslims were primarily the inheritors of a universal Islamic culture. He therefore announced in his presidential address to the Muslim League in 1930 that "the formation of a consolidated North-West Indian Muslim State appears to me to be the final destiny of the Muslims, at least of North-West India" [1, pp. 273-74]. Bengal, it will be noticed, found no place in Iqbal's vision. Nor did it in the name of Pakistan, suggested by a group of Indian

<sup>3</sup> This is the viewpoint of, for example, Wasti [32] quoted in [18].

Muslim students at Cambridge. "This name . . . was mnemonically formed from the names of Muslim majority areas of the north-west: Punjab, Afghanistan (North-West Frontier), Kashmir, Sind, and Baluchistan" [1, p. 275].

But Bengali Muslims would not allow themselves to be left out. A Muslim middle class had grown up in Bengal since the beginning of the present century, helped by special facilities in the fields of education and employment won from the government and by emerging or fructifying economic forces.

The Hindu middle class, however, was solidly entrenched in Bengal's economy. The corresponding Muslim interest could not compete with it, even though it held political power since 1937. . . . In the circumstances, the Bengali Muslim middle class envisaged a quicker and easier way for furthering its interest, by responding to the call of the All-India Muslim League which was steadily gaining strength with its demand for a Muslim homeland. [21, p. 269]

The Muslim League met for its annual session in 1940 in Lahore and adopted the historic resolution demanding independent Muslim states in northwestern and eastern India.

Despite the reference . . . to the possibility of the creation of a plurality of Muslim states, the unanimous comments of the Muslim League leaders made it quite clear that the resolution actually envisaged the creation of a single Muslim state, embracing both zones, north-western as well as eastern. [1, p. 275]

#### IV

When the British withdrew from India in 1947, they left behind two successor states, Pakistan and India.<sup>4</sup> Each of these nations was multiethnic. The Muslim League had won Pakistan by simplifying this situation, maintaining that there were just two major "nations" in India, Muslims and Hindus. The Indian National Congress, which unsuccessfully opposed partition, had of course altogether denied the relevance of ethnic differences to the question of national independence. Bengali Muslims had chosen to ignore their racial, linguistic, and cultural distinctiveness and to identify themselves with other Muslim communities of India, because it suited their economic and political interests to do so.<sup>5</sup> It is clear that religion was being used by them as a "sign," as a "mask," to safeguard and promote their interests. This was the fatal flaw in the edifice of Pakistan.

Though both were multiethnic states, there were two crucial differences between Pakistan and India. First, Pakistan lacked territorial integrity, about twelve hundred miles of Indian territory separating its two wings. Second, whereas no single ethnic category was numerically or politically dominant in India, Bengalis accounted for more than half of Pakistan's population. The political and administrative centre of the latter country was located in its western wing, however. Eco-

<sup>4</sup> Several hundred princely states also became independent after what was described as the lapse of British paramountcy in India. It was expected, however, that these states would accede to one or the other of the two successor states of Pakistan and India.

<sup>5</sup> For a brief description of internal diversities in Pakistan, see [19, pp. 82-83].

nomically also, West Pakistan was in somewhat dominant position, though not decisively so [26]. West Pakistan itself was more like India being constituted of four major ethnic categories, viz., Pukhtuns, Baluchis, Sindis, and Punjabis. Each one of these ethnic categories has distinctive racial, linguistic, and cultural affinities. East Pakistan, however, was characterized by overwhelming cultural homogeneity, about 85 per cent of its people being Bengali Muslims.<sup>6</sup>

Pakistan was thus a "non-national state" composed of several societies within one political system. This characterization, of course, is at variance with the proclaimed ideology of the Muslim League which secured a homeland for Indian Muslims (or at least for some of them, as millions of Muslims, including Bengalis, were left behind in India at the time of partition) on the ground that they constituted one nation. It is clear that if the fact of cultural pluralism in Pakistan had been adequately recognized after partition, the advisability of adopting a policy of "equivalent integration" between the Bengalis and non-Bengalis, and of "uniform integration" perhaps between the four ethnic categories of West Pakistan, would have seemed imperative.<sup>7</sup> Far from recognizing the reality of cultural pluralism, efforts in fact were made to suppress it through, for example, the unsuccessful bid to impose Urdu (the mother tongue of north Indian Muslims but not of any Pakistani Muslim community) as the national language and later to derecognize cultural, socio-economic, and other differences within West Pakistan by abolishing internal provincial boundaries. Consequently, certain communities became politically and economically stronger and culturally arrogant at the cost of others. Cultural pluralism hardened into "structural pluralism" and the basis of the integration of Bengalis within the politico-economic framework became blatantly "differential."<sup>8</sup>

It did not take long for Bengali Muslims to realize the costs of the choice they had made—the price of the mask they had chosen to wear. Territory and culture which had been driven underground as legitimate bases for state formation soon began to be reasserted. The decision to make Urdu as the sole state language of Pakistan was deeply resented by the Bengalis who have always been famous for their pride in their literary heritage. Urdu, written in Persian script, was the product of Hindu-Muslim, and the consequent Persian-Hindi contact during the days of Muslim rule and had become exclusively associated with Muslims as separatist tendencies gained ascendance only from the late nineteenth century onwards.<sup>9</sup> Bengali, written in a Nagri script, similar to that of Sanskrit, was, by contrast, an ancient language, rooted in the soil of Bengal, and had a rich body of literature. Bengali Muslims had contributed to its shaping over the centuries and they felt a

<sup>6</sup> See [19]. Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians accounted for about 11 million out of East Pakistan's 75 million people in 1971. There were also about 2 million Biharis among the Muslims, who had migrated there at the time of partition in 1947. They were culturally distinct from the Bengalis and have remained so.

<sup>7</sup> The terminology has been taken from [29, pp. 435–40].

<sup>8</sup> The terminology used continues to be borrowed from [29].

<sup>9</sup> For an account of the rivalry over Hindi and Urdu, and its political ramifications, see [7].

deep sense of identification with it.<sup>10</sup> By 1954 Bengalis had successfully agitated and won recognition for their language as one of the two state languages. The resentment against alleged West Pakistani domination was proclaimed at the polls that year when Bengali political parties contested provincial assembly seats against candidates put up by Muslim League, the political organization that had won Pakistan. The league's rout was decisive as it won only 9 out of 309 seats [16] [4].

The relationship between the two wings of Pakistan could not be worked out on a democratic basis because Pakistan came under the rule of the military in 1956. During the next fifteen years East Pakistan was treated as a domestic colony by the central government located in the western wing. It is unnecessary here to give the details of this exploitation as these were widely publicized during 1971.<sup>11</sup> The falling apart of Bengali Pakistanis from non-Bengalis found expression in mutual stereotypes often reported in the press. Thus, the Pathans and Punjabis who saw themselves as a brave, manly type, ridiculed the "black monkeys" and "ink-stained clerks" of Bengal. The Bengalis, proud of their literary and musical heritage caricatured West Pakistanis as "cultureless savages" [20].

When Pakistan held its first nation-wide elections ever late in 1970, East Pakistanis had redefined their ethnic identity—they had decided to discard their earlier mask and wear a new one. They went to the polls as BENGALI Muslims rather than as MUSLIM Bengalis. The political platform of the Awami League Party of Sheikh Mujibu-r-Rehman, demanding a very substantial degree of autonomy, was overwhelmingly endorsed. This created an impasse between the two wings of the country which the central government, deeply identified with West Pakistan, tried to resolve by military force. The massiveness and brutality of this force ensured the independence of East Bengal, which finally became a fact in December 1971. Indian military intervention hastened the process, but it was Bengalis themselves who won their freedom.

Bangladesh is based on a political ideology very different from that of the old Pakistan. This ideology is nationalism and secularism. Bangladesh is a nation-state characterized by territorial integrity. Bengali Muslims have learned, the hard way perhaps, to take a new look at their culture. The reference group no longer consists of Muslims somewhere in the west and purification of the Bengali way of life is no more a meaningful slogan. Bengali culture is the over-arching framework within which all citizens of Bangladesh must find their place. Differences of religion, which were given heightened salience in the years before the establishment of Pakistan, have now been accorded a secondary place. When, after the military crack-down of March 1971, Bangladesh was proclaimed as an independent state, the

<sup>10</sup> See [23, pp. 212–39]. "The Muslim contribution to the development of Bengali language and literature was more significant and substantial than that of the Hindus" [23, p. 212]. Here we probably have an example of the effort to belittle the role of Hindus in the formation of Bengali culture. We will see below how drastically the position has changed, eliminating the necessity of such exaggeration of Muslim contributions to Bengali literature.

<sup>11</sup> See [21, Table 7] which sums up a considerable body of materials on the comparative characteristics of the two wings of Pakistan.



choice of a national anthem dramatized the new relationship between the different religious communities of Pakistan. The choice was an early but popular Tagore song, "My golden Bengal, I love you" (*Amar sonar Bangla, ami tomai bhalu bashi*). Now, Rabindranath Tagore was the greatest figure in Bengali music and literature in the first half of the present century. He had won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 [14]. He had died in 1941 and was a Hindu, but these latter were irrelevant facts. "Amar sonar Bangla" probably was not one of his very best songs; that too did not matter. What did matter was that it was a Tagore song and the music had been written by the master himself. Finally, the fact that India's national anthem, chosen in 1947, also was a famous Tagore song seemed no more than the evidence of good taste. Muslims and Hindus, Bangladesh and India, did not have to subsist on relations of mutual exclusion, of cultural difference.

Some statements by Bangladesh intellectuals emphasizing the new relationship verge almost on the extravagant. Two examples may be cited.

(1) "We Bengali Muslims always had considerable respect for Hindus because of their talent, skill and scholarship. We are great fans of them in the field of literature, cinema, theatre, music, education, etc. . . . We are very fond of their composers, singers and performers. We Muslims appreciate the artistic talent and other excellent qualities of Hindu Bengalis and we do not need to feel ashamed of it. [The author then refers to the excellent craftsmanship of Bengali Hindu goldsmiths, potters, weavers, and sweetmeat makers.] In this connexion I would like to mention about a village some ten miles away from Dacca which is famous for its sweetmeat industry. It is a typical Hindu village where the people, keeping intact their traditional art of making sweets, were doing a flourishing business. . . . I am afraid this village is destroyed now and the people might have been killed [by West Pakistani soldiers]" [28].

(2) "Pakistan is the 'angry orphan' in Asia. It neither knows nor recognizes its parents. What is it actually? Indian? Persian? Arab? Central Asian? Who knows? The people of Bangladesh, on the other hand, know that they are first and foremost Bengalis, and in a broader sense they are Indians too—and they are not ashamed to say so. *They do not need to deny their birth on the Indian subcontinent, conceal their genuine ethnic roots and mask their real identity with a pseudo-religious coating . . .*" [27] (italics added).

What is most noteworthy about the above statements, and the one by Abdul Majid Khan quoted earlier in this paper, is that they bring out clearly the dynamic character of ethnic identity [27, p. 5]. Khan, as was noted earlier, complains that in earlier times it "could never occur to any one" to define the Muslims of Bengal in terms of Bengali culture. Shahab-ud-Din does precisely this, because the situation is now changed, and it calls for a new identity-definition, a new mask to wear, a new face to be held forth in public.

The choice that was made in 1947 was not wrong or invalid: it seemed the best choice at that time. The grievances of Bengali Muslims against economic exploitation by Hindu landowners and millowners found expression through identification with the demand for a Muslim homeland. In Pakistan, however, the Bengali found

not only that his economic exploitation was becoming worse but also that he was being denied political rights and even his cultural identity was being threatened. It thus became imperative to redefine his identity in broad cultural, rather than narrow religious, terms.

## V

The purpose of this paper was stated to be, at the very outset, an attempt to briefly bring out some of the implications of the birth of Bangladesh as an independent nation for research into the phenomenon of cultural difference within a state. The materials examined have been historical, but the intention has not been to write a historical interpretation of the concerned events. My use of the materials has been too selective for this paper to anywhere approach the requirements of such an interpretation. I have rather attempted to highlight the fact that the Muslims of Bengal have shifted the emphasis from some elements in their ethnic identity to others in the course of a generation. The reason for each of the two choices has been the overriding need which the Bengalis have felt to preserve their total identity, their cultural boundary vis-à-vis other groups. In this respect they have acted, I suggest, as ethnic categories always will in a multiethnic state.

The key to the situation would seem to be the pursuit of economic advantage and political power. All this was, of course, formulated quite some time ago by Furnivall in his notion of plural society. He saw such a society as consisting of peoples who "mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, *but only in the market-place*, in buying and selling" [9, p. 304] (*italics added*). A recent authority on the phenomenon of cultural pluralism succinctly sums up the situation in these words: "Economic symbiosis and mutual avoidance, cultural diversity and social cleavage, characterize the social basis of the plural society" [15, p. 11]. If the meeting in the market place consistently favours one group of people at the cost of another and the state seems to connive over this, then the deprived people are likely to resort to nationalism, which sums up economic and political aspirations as well as cultural pride. This is what happened in Pakistan. And it could happen elsewhere—in Bangladesh itself, though that seems unlikely. If the relations between India and Bangladesh should turn sour sometime in the future, the salience of religion could well reemerge among Bengali Muslims.

To generalize, one may say, that in multiethnic societies, each ethnic category will seek to pursue political power and economic advantage, by itself or in association with other chosen people. In the context of such dynamic interaction, what is of crucial importance is, as Barth so very rightly emphasizes, the effort of boundary maintenance by ethnic groups, and not the content of ethnicity at any particular time [2, p. 10 et passim]. To be able to effectively manage the task of boundary maintenance it is of prime importance that people retain the freedom to choose, reject, and choose anew the dimension of their total identity that they will most emphasize—the mask that they will wear. There is no inalienable association be-

tween an ethnic category and any particular element in its identity because such lack of flexibility might be fatal to its political aspirations and economic interests. A process of feedback enables people (or their leaders, if you prefer) to evaluate past choices and redefine identity if the same is felt necessary. Culture is treated as a repertoire of masks, a pool of signs and symbols, as it were, from which to choose. The availability of alternatives and pragmatic choice-making thus are of critical importance. Here, once again, Barth has a pertinent observation. He writes:

It is of course perfectly feasible to distinguish between a people's model of their social system and their aggregate pattern of pragmatic behaviour, and indeed quite necessary not to confuse the two. But the fertile problems in social anthropology are concerned with how the two are interconnected, and it does not follow that this is best elucidated by dichotomizing and confronting them as total systems. [2, p. 29]

In other words, our understanding of cultural pluralism is dependent upon the "self-ascription" of ethnic groups being given adequate recognition in our analysis. Any hiatus that may be perceived here between the traditional aims of the anthropologist and the doings of peoples must be bridged. The anthropologist's categories are for description: they have to have fixed meanings. One wants to write the definitive account of a people—be they the Trobriand Islanders, the Nuer, the Pathans, or the Bengalis—in terms of objective attributes. The Bengali example amply demonstrates that this is a bad choice if it is an exclusive one.<sup>12</sup> The anthropologist must focus on processes as well as on attributes.<sup>13</sup> He must operate with a "generative" concept of ethnicity [2, p. 10 et passim]: the most meaningful way of studying cultural difference in society seems to be to study it in history—that is, through time.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> These problems have of course been discussed in past very ably, for example, in [17] [11].

<sup>13</sup> For an important discussion of this point, see [3].

<sup>14</sup> The implications of the argument presented in this paper extend beyond the domain of social anthropology to that of comparative politics, for instance. We need to grow beyond Geertz's undoubtedly seminal discussion of 1963. See [10]. We now need to think in terms of the politics of "accommodation" rather than that of "integration." The latter notion obviously is not a useful one as a guide to policy, or as a conceptual category, in Africa and Asia. See, e.g., [22].

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